homemakers' chat
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U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Monday, December 22, 1941

Subject: "HOMEMADE CHRISTMAS DECORATIONS." Information from foresters and plant scientists of the U. S. Department of Agriculture.

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These are emergency times when it's thrifty as well as patriotic to make what you need out of what you have. And this Christmas the whole family might join in making Christmas decorations for the house out of the free offerings of gardens, fields and forests. You'll be surprised at the lovely wreaths and garlands and table decorations you can make out of evergreen cuttings and wild berries, pine cones, seeds and seed pods, rose hips from the garden, nuts, moss and even wild dry grasses.

When you and the children go out to look for material for Christmas decorations, you'll want to pick and choose carefully. You won't want to cut any of the wild greens that are in danger of dying out from overcutting. Some of our loveliest native plants have almost disappeared in parts of this country from careless destructive cutting. The beautiful American holly, so abundant through the East not many years ago, is now getting pretty scarce in many areas. Women's clubs, nature groups, boy and girl scouts, 4-H Clubs and other organizations have taken up the cause of holly and are trying to help save it. Some States have laws to protect it. Nevertheless, destructive cutting of holly still goes on. People interested in saving holly ask that you buy holly wreaths and decorations only if you know the holly was grown especially for market or was cut under expert supervision instead of destructively.

The western half of the country has no native evergreen holly. But many people in Washington and Oregon grow European holly and much of it is shipped to nearby States for Christmas. Other plants, once common in the East, but now scarce

in many places, are laurel, ground pine, bittersweet, black alder and winterberry. If you live in parts of the country where these are scarce, of course, you won't include them in your homemade Christmas decorations.

You'll find plenty of material without them. You can always clip off small branches from evergreen trees without harming them. And with small branches, you can make garlands, bouquets and hanging balls of pine, fir, spruce, hemlock and cedar. Some gardeners wait until Christmastime to prune their evergreens. Then they have plenty of material for decorations. Balsam fir is one of the great favorites for Christmas use because it holds its color and lasts longer than most evergreens in the hot dry atmosphere inside the house. Hemlock with its dropping branches and compact growth makes beautiful wreaths--but they don't last long unless you hang them outside doors and windows. A good indoor substitute for hemlock is native yew or "ground hemlock" with its short, close, rich-green needles. Whatever part of the country you live in, you'll find greens you can use in gardens and woods--English ivy, boxwood, Southern smilax, Oregon grape, or the many different club mosses.

Now a point or two about making wreaths at home. You need a sharp knife or a pair of strong shears to cut the greens. Then you need strong wire for a frame for the wreath, or for attaching pine cones, and finer wire to bind the greens to the frame. Have the finer wire wound on a heavy stick or spool that you can hold in your hand. Then you can run the wire between your fingers and pull it tight as you bind with the pull coming on the spool rather than on your hand. The frame of the wreath may be wire or long evergreen branches that will bend in a 12 or 14-inch circle without breaking. Have the branches long enough so the ends can overlap several inches. Bind them together at this point with wire or twine. Fill in or "pad" the wreath with evergreen twigs about 4 to 6 inches long. Hold 2 or 3 of these twigs together close to the frame. Bind the stems close with wire, then lay on a

few more twigs farther along. Continue around the circle. It may help to turn one spray inward and the next outward. Ornaments like bright berries, pine cones, seed pods, little bells, or other decorations you can fasten on with wire after the wreath is made.

Over the fireplace or windows or doorways an evergreen roping can make a beautiful festoon effect. You make the roping just as you do wreaths except that you bind the twigs on heavy cord instead of a frame.

One of the prettiest decorations for the Christmas table is a miniature Yule log--a wooden log, 15 or 20 inches long, depending on the size of your table, with holes on the top for red candles, and with greens and cones and other decorations banked around the bottom of the candles. One group of farm people in New England have established a Christmas business shipping packages of small white-birch logs with greens, pine cones, berries and candles into the large cities for use on Christmas tables.

An attractive decoration to hang from the ceiling in a hall or high doorway is an evergreen ball. Make the ball with a foundation of moss, shaped firmly into a round ball 5 inches in diameter, and bound with cord or wire. Leave one long piece of cord to hang the ball from the ceiling. Into this moss foundation stick evergreen twigs about 6 inches long. Stick the twigs in from every side. Sharpen the ends of twigs so they'll go in easily. Decorate the ball with a bow of red ribbon, and hang from the ceiling.

Once you start making wreaths and other decorations many new ideas for decoration will come to you. You'll soon find that many of nature's offerings that you've never noticed before will help your house say: "Merry Christmas."

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